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# Female genital cutting and the politics of Islamicate practices in Egypt: debating development and the religious/secular divide<sup>1</sup>

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My PhD dissertation examined discourses on Female Genital Cutting (FGC) in contemporary Egypt, particularly concerning the relation between FGC and religion. FGC is practiced by both Muslims and Christians and Egypt is among the countries with the highest prevalence rates. Through ethnographic research, the study analysed the vernacularization of transnational activism as an important intervention into local cultural and social debates on gender, sexuality and family norms, in addition to understandings of Islam, Muslim-Christian relations and concepts of race, nation and progress. I argue that FGC is best characterized as an Islamicate practice. A narrow, reifying conceptualization of religion precludes lived understandings of the relation of FGC to Islam and subsequently, precludes more profound social and cultural debate on gendered practices.

*Key words:* FGC, religion, Islam, Egypt, critical development studies

## Context of the doctoral research

Female Genital Cutting (and circumcision in general) has been a widely debated topic in anthropological research since quite a long time. Several authors have argued that it even occupies a central symbolic position in anthropology because it raises a dilemma of a simultaneously moral and epistemological kind: should anthropology be advocating eradication (be on the side of the campaigners and advance knowledge on finding possible avenues toward eradication), or should it on the other hand contextualize Western opposition and try to make sense of the West's increasing opposition and vilifying of these cultural practices – and should we maybe turn the gaze towards one's own bodily practices? (Silverman, 2004: 419).

I have found inspiration in several critical anthropologists (such as Christine Walley, Janice Boddy and Lila Abu Lughod) who showed through their work that there is not

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1 This is the report of PhD research carried out at Ghent University, under the supervision of Chia Longman and Els Leye.

really a need to “pick sides” and that it is possible to make sense of both Western (and global) opposition against the practice, and to contextualize and analyze local supporters (and opponents) of the practice. I thought it was particularly worthwhile to look at the interactions between different positions and how both sides mutually affect each other. I looked therefore at development campaigning discourse against FGC and those debates with which it interacts in Egypt.

As an exception in North Africa, Egypt is among the countries with the highest prevalence rate of FGC (92% of the 15-49 age group according to the 2014 Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey) and is practiced by both Muslims and Christians. FGC was first brought into the transnational sphere during the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), mainly by women from the global North, while being both supported and contested by activists from the global South. The topic made a journey through several international agencies where it was debated whether or not it fell within their competency and scope of action. Initially it was argued that an international intervention against FGC would violate states’ – often only recently gained – sovereignty. By the mid-1990s this became accepted, however, on the ground that FGC causes harm to girls’ and women’s health. In the following decade, FGC became considered as a violation of girl’s and women’s rights and as a form of violence against women. Fighting FGC became established as a global norm and has been widely considered as one of the major successes resulting from transnational feminist advocacy and activism.

My research focus was discourse-orientated. I analysed campaigning discourse as an important intervention into local cultural and social debates on gender, sexuality and family norms. I looked at how transnational activism becomes translated into the Egyptian vernacular and how this is being received in the Egyptian landscape of normative, religious debates on gender, sexuality, religion and conservatism. I argue that this intervention also touches upon understandings of Islam, Muslim-Christian relations and concepts of race, nation and progress. My main focus in these discourses and debates was the relation between FGC and religion. I examined how this relation is represented by campaigners and religious actors, such as state-appointed religious authorities/institutions, the Muslim Brotherhood organization, salafist groups, the Coptic Church and Christian civil society organisations.

### **Theoretical and methodological framework**

Situated mainly in the field of critical anthropology of development, gender and religion, this research equally draws on insights from the field of Middle Eastern Studies and Islamic sciences. One of its main contributions is its analysis of the cultural politics of political Islam and its effects on Muslim-Christian relations. Furthermore, this study can be read as a long plea for thinking interdisciplinary when researching practices such as FGC, in which culture and politics have become historically intertwined. Whereas now, a dominant research focus in literature on stopping the practice’s continuation may obfuscate the social, cultural and political debates that are woven around the practice and that, through their own dynamics, perpetuate it.

This long plea for thinking interdisciplinary leads to one of my conclusions that to understand the struggle over FGC in Egypt we need to understand the struggle over the definition of what FGC really is. And that this is a struggle over discourse and symbolic power. Explanations, support and rejection of FGC can be seen as “the thing for which and by which there is struggle; discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault, 1981 (1970): 53). Indeed, also religious opinions on FGC are understood as discursive constructions in dialogue with other narratives. Through taking a discursive approach to religion (von Stuckrad, 2010), I asked how FGC is actively being made Islamic (religious) and un-Islamic (secular/cultural), revealing the political tensions and questions that are at stake.

My fieldwork was conducted after the revolutionary protests of 2011 and amidst radical political change in the following years. These changes also impacted on my research design, especially when Islamist factions came to power and presented discourses in support of FGC. The different fieldwork sites where I looked into discursive struggle around the question of FGC and religion involved anti-FGC and pro gender-equality activists (Egyptian early grassroots activists of the 1990s, NGO-activities), Islamist parties (Muslim Brotherhood, salafists) and Coptic Christian activists against FGC.

My methodological perspectives were feminist, critical and postcolonial, which means that I aimed to combine an ethically engaged and feminist approach with a critical consciousness of global power balances and our shared colonial heritage. The concepts of “relationality” (Pedwell, 2010) and “relational ethics” were key in making this combination. Relational ethics (Ong in Scheper-Hughes, 1995) focuses on the notions of interdependency and interconnectivity between cultures as dynamic units, and between researcher and researched (Abu-Lughod, 1991). It departs from an understanding of a “transcultural space” (Salvatore, 1997) in which internal dynamics and dialogues produce epistemologies. In other words, it means that the production of opinions and discourses necessarily occurs in a transcultural space where each of the stakeholders is positioned in relation to each other.

My methods consisted of ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, interviewing and group talks in the course of fifteen months between September 2012 and September 2014. Many informal talks and conversations helped to guide my research focus and to grasp widely-shared opinions on FGC. I participated in a series of ten awareness-raising seminars (of which seven in Cairo and three in Luxor) organized by an NGO umbrella. These involved eight house visits with church volunteers, doing awareness raising against FGC. My data consisted of fieldwork notes and a very thorough literature analysis.

## **Research results and conclusions**

### *Awareness raising: translations and subversions of norms*

In awareness-raising seminars, transnational development campaigning discourse becomes translated or vernacularized (Merry, 2001). FGC is explained as not a religious but a cultural practice while making it discursively part of a larger scheme of modernization

and national progress. It is represented as a hard tradition and custom and those who perform it become racialized and hierarchically placed as “behind” in the linear modernization narrative. Women’s desire to be part of the modern is invoked in order to persuade them against practicing FGC.

It is argued that FGC is a harmful practice that does not affect female sexual desire (the main popular reason for performing it) but does affect women’s and men’s sexual pleasure and enjoyment. In this process of raising awareness, dominant conservative norms of gender and sexuality are reiterated. A loss of capacity of women’s sexual enjoyment is presented as endangering her sexual relations with her spouse and therefore the marital bond in general. In this manner, the fight against FGC becomes translated as a fight for marriage, which stands for social stability and cohesion. Alluding to social crisis, high divorce rates and the threat this poses to family values, abandoning FGC is encouraged as being supportive to social cohesion.

Other cultural tropes that trainers appeal to while dissuading to perform FGC are values of virginity, modesty and raising “good girls”. In the representations of awareness-raising seminars, FGC does not protect girls against pre-marital sexual activity – only proper education and instilling religious values are able to do so. In this way, the externally located bodily practice of FGC is replaced by an internally located sense of morality and self-discipline.

#### *FGC and religion: Islamicate practices*

A literature study of secondary sources on Islamic legal tradition learns that the relation between FGC and religion is historically less contested than it is today. According to traditional scholarship of all four Sunni schools of law, the dominant classical view has been predominantly favorable of the practice (Ali, 2006 ; Berkey, 1996 ; Bouhdiba, 2012 ). In transnational activism against FGC, however, work towards the abandonment of FGC challenges this historical consensus of classical scholars, although this is rarely put explicitly or even recognized implicitly.

The transnational agencies’ aim of “accelerated social transformation” invests great efforts in untying FGC from Islam. The link between FGC and religion becomes reduced to a one-dimensional and categorical phrasing that FGC is not religious (Islamic) but cultural. The one-dimensional question whether FGC is Islamic or not already expects a one-dimensional and definite negative answer. Both question and answer are placed in a seemingly timeless and placeless framework. Islamic law scholar Kecia Ali also refers to these reductions as “methodologically problematic oversimplifications for strategic aims” (Ali, 2006: 101).

Religion is then understood as a universalized and decontextualized category. Whereas, typically, the secular nation-state is understood to offer political mediation of particular identities related to class, gender and religion (Asad, 2003: 5). It is clear through the example of anti-FGC campaigning that this role is also played by the “international community”, acting as a secular sphere that redefines and reconfigures the place and meaning of religion.

The desire for the abandonment of the practice does not only lead to a misrecognition of the historic relation between FGC and Islamic legal tradition, but at the same time, through its decontextualized conceptualization, it reinforces a current tendency of authoritarian discourses within Islamic opinion making (Abou El Fadl, 2001). While this tendency is usually not in favor of women and gender equality, a similar reasoning is being followed. It strengthens an understanding of Islam as a rigid and static system of belief and experience, rather than connecting to or calling on the historical, flexible and contextual nature of interpretation in Islamic legal thought and practice (Tucker, 1998), in an effort of working towards social transformation.

The aim of campaigns is indeed to accelerate transformation of social practices that are shared by society at large, by both Muslims and Christians. FGC is therefore best understood as neither “strictly cultural” or “authentically Islamic” but rather as an Islamicate practice. Originally coined by Marshall Hodgson, the term Islamicate refers to those social and cultural phenomena that fall outside of the scope of Islam as a doctrinal system but are nonetheless related to and interconnected with the larger sphere of Islamic society and culture (Hodgson, 1974). Thus, Islamicate refers to cultural practices shared by all Muslims and non-Muslims forming part of Muslim-majority societies. I argue that perceiving FGC as such enables a better understanding of what is at stake in the debates in favor of abandonment and Islamist discourses of (re)claiming the practice as an Islamic one.

### *Islamist responses*

Groups belonging to political Islam, or Islamists, have been said to want to re-Islamize FGC (Badran, 2009: 180). During my fieldwork, Islamists gained considerable political success in the elections and delivered the head of state, Muhammad Mursi between 2012 and 2013. My field contacts working in NGOs would tell me that the Brotherhood “wanted to bring FGC back”, together with other gender conservative legal measures.

When in power, the Brotherhood and its associated political party (Freedom and Justice Party) indeed aimed at reshaping national institutions of women’s rights, wanting to turn the National Council of Women into a Council of Family and questioning gender-equality norms at the transnational level. On FGC, the movement had previously expressed opposition to legislation (unsuccessfully as the 2008 Child Law effectively criminalizes FGC). In 2012, local Brotherhood divisions caught the public eye after organizing a mobile medical caravan touring villages that offered FGC.

The movement and its leaders, however, did not reclaim the practice as an Islamic practice. Ambiguity is practiced as a governing principle. As a vibrant part of Islamic revivalism, the Brotherhood’s politics and discourses aimed less for installing Islamic teachings than for a re-traditionalization of society and women’s status. This means that a vigorous policy towards the family was pursued, one that foregrounds women’s roles in the family, mainly in mothering and nurturing. In the words of a Brotherhood interviewee: “Islam respects motherhood, femininity and biological differences” (al-Deiry, 2013), while arguing that “the family forms the solution for all social ills”.

Salafist groups differentiated themselves from the Brotherhood in terms of methodology of Islamic teaching and knowledge transfer. On FGC, they differed as they were less ambiguous, less pragmatic and more committed to the frame of Islamic reference (*marjaʿiyya islamiyya*) as a basis for contemporary politics. Some members of parliament belonging to the salafist Nur party showed support for FGC and interest in revoking anti-FGC legislation and although Nur did not support this initiative, it supported the represented vision.

Also salafist cultural politics is embedded in gender-conservative ideologies, as was apparent in the public debates emphasizing women's rights and participation in society. However, their commitment to keep in line with Islamic tradition according to their own methodology prevails. Prominent salafist shaykhs, such as Muhammad Hassān and Ishaq abu-l Huwayni are therefore exemplary in demonstrating their loyalty to the importance of the Islamic tradition and insisting on the Islamic-ness of FGC. Their opinions reveal a concern with affirming a positive relation between FGC and Islam and in questioning the authority of other voices. The undertone in their speech invokes the question as to who has the right to determine what is Islamic and what is not, referring directly to the dominant transnational development discourse.

#### *FGC through the lens of Muslim-Christian relations*

Finally, the lens of Muslim-Christian relations deepens our understanding of FGC as an Islamicate practice. Women's bodies and female sexuality often serve as symbolic boundary markers between communities. Between Copts and Muslims, both discourses of sameness and difference circulate widely and narratives of FGC figure in both of them. Class and everyday life experiences seem crucial in determining whether FGC is perceived as either a shared cultural practice that unites Egyptians (as sharing most social realities) or as a religious, Islamic practice in which Christians do not partake. My fieldwork showed that FGC indeed occupies a place in sectarian imageries. Not performing FGC has become for some a powerful marker of Christian community identity. In sum, Coptic minority politics combined with the ongoing dynamics of religious revivalism among both Muslims and Christians led to a sharpened sense of defining what is particularly Muslim and Christian.

I have argued in my dissertation that FGC is best understood as an Islamicate practice and that the question whether FGC is Islamic or not is reductionist, partial and epistemologically problematic. It does not recognize the legacy of classical Islamic scholarship and privileges authoritarian opinion making over flexible, contextualized interpretation of Islamic legal thought and practice. Neither does it consider the pluralism and heterogeneity of actual practicing Muslim communities and the diversity of lived experiences. In the words of Abdelwahab Boudhiba: "Circumcision, like excision, is more a practice of Muslims than of Islam" (Bouhdiba, 2012 182).

A reifying approach to religion and an emphasis on religious male authorities also means that an array of other responses and experiences remains unseen, that more profound gendered cultural questions and social debate remain unaddressed. A narrow, rei-



fying conceptualization of religion precludes more dynamic understandings of the relation of FGC to Islam and subsequently, it precludes other strategies for working towards social and cultural change and transformation.

Finally, this research demonstrates a paradox of development initiatives within a modernizing frame and secular understandings of the human agent-subject: they inevitably need to create divisions between backward and modern, between inhuman and human. It requires to first discursively exclude communities from humanity (by means of condemning social practices as uncivilized, not modern, in short, inhuman) in order to consequently include them and to shape them to the desired image of the modern human. This study begs the questions whether we can aspire to alternatives of activism against FGC that are not based on these binaries but are rather based on positive image-eries of the self and “local” culture, and whether social change can be promoted without initiatives of persuasion and political or legal coercion.

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